



The Baseball Codes: Beanballs, Sign Stealing, and Bench-Clearing Brawls: The Unwritten Rules of America's Pastime

Jason Turbow, Michael Duca

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Everyone knows that baseball is a game of intricate regulations, but it turns out to be even more complicated than we realize. What truly governs the Major League game is a set of unwritten rules, some of which are openly discussed (don't steal a base with a big lead late in the game), and some of which only a minority of players are even aware of (don't cross between the catcher and the pitcher on the way to the batter's box). In *The Baseball Codes*, old-timers and all-time greats share their insights into the game's most hallowed and least known traditions. For the learned and the casual baseball fan alike, the result is illuminating and thoroughly entertaining.

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At the heart of this book are incredible and often hilarious stories involving national heroes (like Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays) and notorious headhunters (like Bob Gibson and Don Drysdale) in a century-long series of confrontations over respect, honor, and the soul of the game. With *The Baseball Codes*, we see for the first time the game as it's actually played, through the eyes of the players on the field.

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With rollicking stories from the past and new perspectives on baseball's informal rulebook, *The Baseball Codes* is a must for every fan.

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Suziqoregon says

3.5 Stars

This was fun and interesting and you don't have to be a rabid baseball fan to understand or enjoy it. I'm a casual baseball fan at best and I liked this book. It was good to read the stories about some of the players who's names I knew.

Some of the 'unwritten' rules were things I already knew about but others were rather obscure. The authors interviewed many players and had many stories to tell. Some were funny. In the chapter about cheating and stealing signs this one made me laugh out loud.

If the warning works, there's rarely reason to escalate things. Some pitchers, however, like to ensure that their message has been received. In 1993, when Blue Jays pitcher Jack Morris was clued in to the sign-tipping efforts of a baserunner at second, he spun on his heel, walked toward his opponent, and, pointing toward the plate, said, "I'm throwing a fastball and it's going at him. Make sure you tell him that." Then he delivered the pitch, as promised, knocking the hitter down. At that point, Morris made a second trip toward the runner. "Did you tell him?" he yelled. "Did you?"

I liked this one and I'm keeping it out from the library so The Hubster can read it.

Ed says

Top-story baseball book, ranking up there with Ball Four. Jason Turbow looks at the cheating, pranks, rookie hazing, kangaroo courts, and the whole shebang. He uses lots of MLB players and relates their anecdotes. What I got from the book was baseball is played a certain right way, and "THE CODE" is what makes it the great game it is. I recognized many of the names like my all-time favorite pitcher, Dick Bosman, and the casual fan might not enjoy the detailed narrative as much as I did. Lots of inside stuff makes for a fun read, though.

Linda says

So I've wrapped up another baseball season by finishing another baseball book, one I first picked up out of curiosity, mostly expecting it to be an entertaining look at the game from another angle beyond the rules and the stats. It is that, but rather than being a mere diversion *The Baseball Codes* has provided an essential stage in my baseball education. Learning about the unwritten rules, their evolution over time, and the history of their practice and their breach, does as much to help understand the game as getting into the details of the formal rules and stats.

Looking at baseball from the perspective of the codes transforms the beginner fan's understanding of the game. For example, some of the rules you might think you could intuit -- it doesn't take a big leap of logic to conclude that stealing signs isn't cool -- are actually far more nuanced in practice. It turns out that sign stealing is widely attempted and almost expected; as the saying goes, "if you're not cheating, you're not trying". The real offense is persisting in sign stealing once you've been caught.

Many of the other unwritten codes are more surprising -- such the intricate calculations behind the determination of which offenses merit retaliation, how that retaliation will be carried out, by whom, and when (which eventually leads to the realization that the beanball you just saw might not have been a response to some untoward showboating by the batter in his previous at-bat, but rather could be the consequence of some distant offense committed in another game, by another player, in another league altogether even).

I have only one aesthetic quibble with the writing, which is that when the authors provide a series of examples to illustrate a point, the transition between anecdotes is usually constructed as a variation on the theme of, "As amazing as X was, it wasn't anywhere near as shocking as Y". This stylistic tic is repeated so often it gets old, and intrudes on the flow of the narrative. In the grand scheme of things, though, this is a trifle. The detailed, exhaustively sourced *Baseball Codes* is a fascinating inside look at baseball that will hold the attention of casual spectators and seasoned fans alike.

Jay says

Fun stories, but there's a lot of them, and they start to run together after a while. I most liked the practical jokes section for the anecdotes and the sign stealing section for the shear institutionalized cheating it described. Makes you wonder about what home field advantage really means. This is told as the code of the players, from back in history, but it made me wonder whether the baseball owners also were behind some of these "codes". For instance, not piling on runs when ahead provided for more entertaining games for the fans, which is in the owner's best interest. Brawls could also be considered in the owner's interest if it drew fans (or news reports/advertising). There wasn't much discussion about owners (beyond Steinbrenner, but what baseball book can avoid talking about Steinbrenner). The audio narration was a bit dry given the similarity of the stories. This would have benefited from additional audio features like music, sound effects, more distinctive voices, or real game description.

Mark Mitchell says

This book is so far "inside baseball" that by the time you've finished reading it you've penetrated through the cowhide, made your way through a tangle of yarn, and bored into the cork center.

Chapter after chapter provide a detailed guide to the unwritten rules of player etiquette -- everything from not stealing in blowouts to taking a pitch when a pitcher has given up back-to-back home runs to what happens to players who don't participate in a bench-clearing brawl. The appropriate punishment for many violations is a high hard one -- but there are other creative enforcement techniques ranging from hard tags to clubhouse

kangaroo courts. (And, apparently, lighting shoes on fire.) Turbow illustrates general principles with specific stories, including interviews with a pantheon of famous players.

As a Little League coach, the book serves as a useful (if occasionally disturbing) reminder of the somewhat violent nature of the professional game. One of the chapters is entitled "If You're Not Cheating, You're Not Trying" -- an inversion of the Little League injunction to "play fair." Desperate players trying to make it to The Show, or to hang on to a fading career, do whatever they can to gain an edge.

Turbo describes "The Code" of baseball with reverence and a bit of nostalgia. He feels that some of the unwritten rules have been watered down or forgotten by the latest generation of players. And, yet, he points to examples of youngsters honoring older customs and agrees that the rules have always been in flux. Players should know these things and so should committed fans.

zumiee says

Baseball's so-called "unwritten rules" are examined here, with a subtle mixture of seriousness and humor. There are lots of great baseball stories in this book, and baseball fans everywhere will find much to enjoy here.

michelle says

there may not be crying in baseball but there sure are a lot of Feelings.

John-Michael Pahlavan says

Tedious, but decent. Anyone who finishes Turnbow's 'Unwritten Rules' manifesto will come away with a deeper understanding and appreciation for America's pastime.

John Johnson says

The 'code' is a set of unwritten rules baseball players play by and enforce on the field. Most of the 'rules' are really about good sportsmanship. Pitchers are the primary enforcers, hitting batters to retaliate for infractions. Sometimes runners will be the enforcers, punishing vulnerable infielders with a hard slide.

This book goes into great detail about those rules, but that's not why I read it. I read it because inside there are many examples of times the rules were enforced. I loved reading the old stories about players I remember. I think that's really what the book is about; the untold stories of the players we all remember (and a few we might not recognize). Turbow has done a great job telling those stories, making the book a fun read for me and I would recommend it for any baseball fan who is also a reader.

jeremy says

baseball, perhaps more than any other sport, can appear deceptively simple to the outsider or casual fan. it is, however, a richly nuanced game governed for more than a century as much by the written rulebook as by a constantly evolving tacit philosophy referred to as "the code." the code concerns itself with nearly every aspect of the game and can be considered baseball's moral compass, in place to engender loyalty not only to one's teammates, but also to the game itself.

the baseball codes, written by jason turbow (with michael duca), is an anecdotal glimpse into the game's unwritten rules. intimidation, retaliation, cheating, and general etiquette are all covered at length, and even the most devout fan will learn something new. the many unbelievable stories employed to illustrate a particular tenet of the code make this book a must-read for any sports lover who has ever spent the long winter pining for the month of april to come again. in an age of sports media often dominated by tales of performance-enhancing drugs, multi-million dollar contracts, off-the-field improprieties, and superstar diva personalities, it's refreshing to read about the game beyond all of the sensationalized headlines. while *the baseball codes* is at times too repetitious, it's hard not to get caught up in the authors' obvious enthusiasm. the book, at its core, is a collection of unforgettable moments that help to define the often misunderstood principles underlying the greatest game ever played.

GO PHILS!

Nathan says

One of the things I love about baseball is the subculture that has grown up within and around it. That subculture is the raw material of this book. Both the well-known "codes" as well as the more obscure traditions are covered, from not mentioning a no-hitter in progress, to the finer points of clubhouse etiquette. Supplemented with generous amounts of player interviews, this book feels like a day-in-the-life tour of a major leaguer as much as anything. There is a slightly distracting tendency to reference a specific game without providing enough background, but that's all right, since the point is always obvious from the particular code being discussed. Entertaining from start to finish. And I love the cover art, too.

Roger says

My first encounter with THE BASEBALL CODES came on a long drive on I-90 in Minnesota, listening to what was undoubtedly a pre-taped interview with the author during a Twins rain delay. The interview was entertaining enough to prompt me to read this book. It's been a long haul. There are interesting tidbits in THE BASEBALL CODES, but it would have been better suited to an article, and not even a NEW YORKER or THE ATLANTIC length piece.

One dilemma Turbow faces is the amorphous state of his subject matter. There is no written baseball code. It is a product of a culture that changes over time, always depends on context, and is interpreted differently by individuals, even when they may be discussing the same incident. Thus, it is impossible to define universal patterns precisely, and instead the focus is on a litany of examples that may be ascribed to baseball players

enforcing or living by "the code". It can make for some long, sometimes tedious chapters. At times, the examples presented in this book can be readily explained by factors other than the putative baseball code. In the book (pp. 137-41), the author describes at length a rift between the Red Sox and the Rays that lasts for nearly the entirety of the first decade of the 21st century. The supposed catalyst is the baseball code, but a quicker summary is that the two teams did not like one another. Earlier, on pp. 98-9, there is an in-depth explanation of how Nolan Ryan threw a "bow-tie" pitch to Lenny Dykstra as a lesson on baseball decorum. Dykstra had shown too much on-field emotion after a close play according to the author. Except, the bow-tie pitch occurs in the middle of the next game, after a bunt. Yes, Ryan seems to be communicating something to the younger Dykstra, but the author's causal sequence seems convoluted.

The book is not without its charms. A chapter on the etiquette of no-hitters is entertaining. There is also a funny story about the pitcher Jose Nunez and his first official at bat (pp. 168-9). The book also reveals the centrality of cheating to the major-league game. The example of the 1960 Chicago White Sox institutionalizing their sign-stealing is telling, especially given the stark contrast between their home and road winning percentages. I suspect the White Sox were doing the same thing in 1959, which puts a damper on their pennant that year. This topic does lend some complexity to discussions of how MLB and the Hall of Fame should treat acknowledged steroids abusers. I have strong opinions on this topic, but the history indicates there needs to be more nuance to the suggestion that Bonds, Clemens and Sosa cheated so they are out.

The concluding thoughts on how the code has been minimized in recent decades sounds mostly like old guys yelling at the kids for not doing things the way it was done in the olden days. Yes, you can argue that big salaries and television contracts and other financial considerations have replaced the love of the sport as the primary definition of how baseball life is conducted. However, in this case the argument is undercut by using spokesmen such as Pete Rose to suggest it was much better in the old days. There is a man who always did and always will scrape for the last buck and who treasured "the code" in large part because his teammates covered up his road-trip infidelities for years.

Lots of anecdotes
can be found in baseball's lore.
Doesn't explain though.

Steve Bennett says

This is a quick, fun read. I have never understood the unwritten codes of baseball and I guess I still don't. But they exist nonetheless. The book at length discusses my least favorite unwritten code--that when a team has a lead that the other team thinks is "too much" the winning team should stop trying. As a recent player on an adult softball team that regularly lost games by scores like 35-4 and 28-3, I can kind of empathize. But I still don't really support the unwritten rule. The book discusses Bob Brenly's hissy fit when Ben Davis broke up Curt Schilling's perfect game by bunting for a hit. The one incident I wished the book recounted was Pete Rose's crying when Gene Garber broke Rose's 44 game hitting streak by striking him out on a changeup. Rose complained that throwing a changeup to break someone's hitting streak was somehow unmanly and was certainly against the unwritten codes.

There are a few unwritten codes I understand. One, if you are caught trying to steal the catcher's signs to the pitcher, the next pitch is going right at your head. Two, if your teammates are involved in a brawl on the field, don't just sit in the dugout chewing sunflower seeds. Those two I can support. The rest not so much.

I'm definitely ready for the spring and the 2012 baseball season.

Rich says

An entertaining and often insightful glance into baseball's sometimes ambiguous moral universe. While some of the codes--never talking to a pitcher during a no-hitter, what happens in the clubhouse STAYS in the clubhouse--are still firmly in place and rarely disputed, others, like when stealing becomes a matter of rubbing it in or when it's appropriate to give a hitter a "bowtie" with an inside fastball are constantly up for debate. Players from those in the HOF to the many dusted off from the shelves of obscurity are crisply depicted in a collection of entertaining stories. Some of the anecdotes used to demonstrate said codes are well-known others less-known, but the authors enrich them both with detail, humor and the authenticity of first-hand accounts and interviews. A definite must-read for the baseball fanatic, and a telling glance inside the world of baseball to novices.

Joe says

If you're a serious fan of baseball then I think this book will be great entertainment for the stories which are humorous and instructive. If you're a more casual fan, then it will provide some background for baseball's increasingly anachronistic unwritten rules. As the authors note in the afterword, these unwritten rules are changing and disappearing, probably for the overall good of the game. While teaching a batter not to showboat by throwing at them was once the way that ballplayers policed themselves, today players make millions of dollars, and take more personal umbrage at the potential injury and loss of income that can be inflicted. For any fan, however, it is a quick read that provides interesting and funny insight into the game's past.
